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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of benchmarking in institutional research, a comparative analysis methodology designed to help colleges and universities increase their educational quality and delivery systems. The primary purpose of benchmarking is to compare an institution to its competitors in order to improve the product (in this case education) it produces. Among the steps in benchmarking are (1) identifying what is to be benchmarked and the comparative companies to include in the measurement, (2) determining data collection methods and collecting the data, (3) determining current and projected future performance levels, (4) communicating benchmark findings and gaining acceptance, (5) developing and implementing action plans, and (6) recalibrating measurements. It is stressed that for benchmarking to be effective, there must exist a free sharing of information. Several examples of benchmarking are highlighted, along with discussions concerning its application on an international scale. The paper argues that institutions of higher education must indulge in strategies such as benchmarking in order to further develop instructional paradigms that serve to enrich their contribution. (Contains 12 references.) (GLR)

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BENCHMARKING AS A GLOBAL STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING INSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The world is watching as institutions of higher education take a close look at themselves and how they view teaching and learning. The planet is populated with individuals, who with increasing curiosity and drive, look to universities to provide an innovative learning experience that translates into an improved lifestyle for the student consumer. Not only is the population more diverse, but it is transforming its entire profile. University students are older, wiser, and more determined than ever to receive a meaningful education and at the same time, improve their quality of life.

Institutions of higher education who commit to improving instruction will do a better job of "selling their product" and preserving their student population. As resources become less available and survival more eminent, universities will find it necessary to introduce teaching methods that give them a "competitive edge." Simply put, students have become consumers of education and we have become the supplier.

Not only is the instructional delivery system in need of an overhaul, but the curriculum at the university level must focus on internationalization. A united Germany, the democratization of Poland, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a pending North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement, war in Bosnia, the new Shinjinrui in Japan, the future of China post 1997, increased trade among Asian countries, the human tragedy of HIV1 and HIV2 in Africa, along with the state of Texas still threatening to secede from the union, all prove to be a fierce influence on university curricula.

The secret to success is in restructuring our universities without sacrificing critical attributes that distinguish them from one another and give them life. One way in which to accomplish this task is to engage in benchmarking. Simply put, it is the process of finding the world-class

examples of a product, service, and operational system and then adjusting products, services, or systems to meet or beat that standard (Gerber, 1990:38). In the United States, corporations such as Xerox, Ford Motor Company, AT&T, and AiResearch have actively participated in this process in order to improve their performance. In addition to harvesting a few Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards, these companies had the courage to admit that through benchmarking, the best of the best can be identified, and what makes them the best can either be duplicated or modified, depending on how it fits with the company doing the benchmarking.

Byrne (1993) summarized a recent program review conducted by Harvard's Business School who he believes is victim of criticism due to the mounting pressures US businesses face. Nonetheless, Harvard embarked upon a similar strategy found in the benchmarking process by actively visiting nearly two dozen rivals and other organizations. Harvard intended to compare itself to its competitors and in turn, provide a better product to its consumers. This is the primary purpose of benchmarking and it drastically changes the face of program review as we know it.

Specifically, benchmarking includes the following: (1) identifying what is to be benchmarked, (2) identifying comparative companies, (3) determining data collection methods and collecting the data, (4) determining current performance levels, (5) projecting future performance levels, (6) communicating benchmark findings and gaining acceptance, (7) establishing functional goals, (8) developing action plans, (9) implementing the plans and monitoring progress, and (10) recalibrating measurements. The process involves a keen sense of knowing how to gather information. AT&T's benchmarking supervisor, Hull, suggests that if benchmarking is to be effective, then it has to be honest and consist of a free sharing of information.

He insists on proceeding with caution because when you deal with competitors, you cannot always trust that they will tell you everything (Gerber, 1977:40). Gerber also reminds us that success from the visitation comes from the skill in quantifying what has been observed and tailoring it to fit the visiting institution (p.60).

The power of benchmarking rests in the hands of those who are compelled to investigate competitors, deal directly with real data, and make the necessary modifications. Additional evidence of benchmarking at the university level is found in the National Association of College and University Business Officers' program that is devoted to disseminating information related to the management and financial administration of colleges and universities by providing information that relates to the principles on which management and financial administration are based. It is of a practical nature and assists in day to day institutional operations, that increases awareness of current issues in higher education, and that reports on results of research and efforts to develop sound practices in these fields (NACUBO, p. 14). Although specifically designed to promote institutional management and financial practices, NACUBO maintains a division devoted to professional development. There is nothing to keep this organization from integrating into this department, a section devoted to instruction.

Furthermore, if institutions of higher education are to survive, there must be a forum for sharing strategies for improving instruction consistent with the common goal of bringing to our universities a sincere commitment to a "world" curriculum. O'Connor (1982) refers to the UNESCO recommendation on Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace, and Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. According to O'Connor, this served as a legitimizing force and an incentive for many

Europeans who were attempting to confront the parochialism of the populace. This included a commitment to understanding the multicultural nature of European societies, the problems of minority or migrant communities, and the increasing evidence of underlying interracial tensions (p. 224). In addition, McDaniel (1990) informs us that the European Communities were established without education as an integral part of the agenda. However, since 1970's, education has indeed become an important topic to the European Community.

In an effort to further investigate this focus, a Delphi study conducted in 1990, gathered data from 700 universities of which seventeen countries were represented in Western Europe. The outcome of this study called for the following alterations and/or additions to our current university system: (1) the introduction of interchangeable teaching modules, (2) development of a international quality assessment system, (3) introduction of a Europe-oriented core curriculum (4) mobility of students both nationally and internationally, (5) exports of student grants and loans, and (6) introduction of top up grants, centrally distributed . Additionally, there was the call for a "supra-national education policy" that would establish networks of information between exchanging institutions including the general introduction of a European credit-points system (p. 22).

Groennings (1986) summons a new learning for universities. He reminds us that several factors have contributed to the internationalization of the universities. He suggests that we are concerned with matters of resources, environment, food, satellite communications, oceanic development, and migration (p.5). It was not by chance that the United States Congress in 1980, reauthorized the Higher Education Act, and moved NDEA VI to HEA VI in part to demonstrate that the international dimension integral to higher education. Congress added Part B for international business to Title VI, hoping in part

that the juxtaposition of foreign language and area study programs would spark some creativity (p.6). Cerych and Sabbatier (1986) conclude that governmental efforts to redesign the higher education systems lead from "great expectations" to "mixed performance" (p. 67). The role of government in higher education varies vividly from one nation to another, but what is occurring is an awakening that we "are all in this together". In 1982, the Carnegie Foundation stressed a need for universities to do a better job of regulating themselves.

As the planet's population embraces mobility, we must conceptualize the world as the university and individual institutions of higher education, as the classrooms. More than 60,000 students from the United States have studied and taught in countries other than their own since the Fulbright Act was instituted in 1946. Currently, one out of every four students at Harvard's Business School is from a country other than the United States, and many colleges and universities are utilizing overseas centers and federal contractual relationships as means of advancing the internationalization of their faculties (Groennings, p. 11). As of 1990, American universities were awarding one fourth of its doctorates to non-US. citizens. The presence of non-citizen students in universities around the world is becoming commonplace.

In spite of the international mobility of students, Groennings' study in New England discovered that the area's business schools annually produce only two to four doctorates with specialization in international business. A decade ago, the American Council on Education found that three quarters of students completing business doctorates had taken no international courses. Countries throughout the world are demonstrating their attempt to meet the internationalization challenge. Japan has created a variety of institutions of higher education including junior college, college of technology, special

training schools, and traditional universities made up of both graduate and undergraduate schools. In order to struggle with their own international consciousness and national survival, Japan in 1984, instituted the National Council on Education Reform that served as an ad hoc advisory committee to the Prime Minister (Sato, 1991:18). The recommendations stemming from this advisory council included putting an emphasis on individuality, making a commitment to lifelong learning, and coping with various changes in our society, including internationalization in different sectors and the spread of information media. Just prior to these recommendations, Japan developed the University of the Air, established in 1983. The purpose was to provide education primarily to women in their homes. These educational programs are delivered either by television, the radio, or other diverse media.(p.16).

Australia has abandoned its tuition free university program and has currently undergone dramatic restructuring by what are termed "joint ventures" with corporations in Australia. One outcome of these partnerships is the conflict created by the corporations, who participated in appointing professorial fellows who took on the role of traditional faculty (Williamson, 1990). As a result, one company filed suit against a university claiming that as part of its financial support, a university had pledged to hand over the full commercial rights to a new technology that had been developed by the academics. As a consequence, the Federation of Australian University Staff Association developed a document offering guidelines to protect academic severity of the university who accepts support from private corporations. The challenge rests not only in who has the rights to university products, but who has jurisdiction on what is taught in the classroom.

As far as 229 Russian students visiting America in the summer of 1993, are concerned, learning does not necessarily take place in a traditional

university classroom. Students from Russia will spend eight weeks learning about the banking industry by working with bankers in America. This program is sponsored by the federal government, and provided through Fairfield University in Connecticut (Mc Manus, 1993:8).

Central to Israel's challenge, Ben-David (1986) comments that the question of how it is possible to maintain high quality research and etching in a system with an increasingly heterogeneous student population and an egalitarian teaching body, must be addressed. Although access to the university has never been an issue to students in Israel, the changing population reflecting an international flavor, is a challenge to say the least.

Hayhoe tells us that you can hardly find two societies more different from China and Canada. Yet if China can learn from Canada areas of graduate study, and Canada can learn from China how to sustain alternatives to traditional knowledge such as China's medicine, and preserving the literature and culture, then Hayhoe believe that both countries could benefit (1992, p. 179).

Citron sites cases of a changing university. He comments that the concept of the university is changing and that major corporations are collaborating with universities to establish degree granting corporate schools and programs. Specifically, General Motors Institute, Pennsylvania State's affiliation with a major electronics company, General Electric, Rutgers University's arrangement with Johnson and Johnson, are primary examples (1989, p. 367). He also suggests that more and more businesses will conduct their own research thus resulting on less of a dependency on universities for this purpose. Whether this leads to a decrease in direct instruction, a return to the "universities under trees" prevalent in the US. in the 1960's, or in a complete interactive computer videodisc transformation, is best left up to the innovators.

As a consequence, what we are left is a world that has within its boundaries institutions of higher education that are experiencing tremendous change. In the meantime, they are taking a long hard look at themselves to see exactly what remains of what has long been a "standing profile". Between the EC, US Congress, and an uprising of corporate interest in the university system, the thinking machine is busy at work. We can no longer ignore our global responsibilities, a mobile student population, declining resources, and a society that is changing its complexion daily. We must garnish our intellectual palates with the most innovative and daring teaching methods for pure survival, if nothing else.

If universities throughout the world recognize the need to focus on internationalization and capture an audience that is globally entrenched, they are only doing for themselves what has already been done to them. Developing a strategy for identifying the best of the best in order to improve instruction to a population that is changing, in an organization that is transforming, simply makes sense. Benchmarking is just one way of discovering who is doing what well. It provides an initial support system for those of us who wish to collaborate and survive this ordeal. For a university to preserve its identity is paramount, but this mission falls in line directly behind either proclaiming or reclaiming a place in the universe. This can only be done by discarding what no longer works and introducing what does work. Common sense tells us that for those who remain behind and fail to see things as they are, they will simply fade away. For the rest of us, who are determined to take the risk of sharing what is that we do well, there is promise.

Universities can no longer experience the luxury of claiming their ranks contingent upon historical contributions. Institutions of higher education

must indulge in strategies such as benchmarking in order to further develop instructional paradigms that serve to enrich their contribution. Whatever the strategy, whether its benchmarking or birthmarking, the alternative is that universities will no longer exist because they stubbornly resist change. We must embrace the belief that we can learn from one another as we come face-to-face with internationalization. This is our only hope.

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